

Town Halls continue



Glynn County Commission chairman David O'Quinn (At Large #1) (left to right) and Commissioner Sammy Tostensen (Dist. 1) listen as Commissioner Wayne Neal (Dist. 3) addresses the large crowd that gathered in the conference room at the Holiday Inn on SPUR 25 last week for another in a series of Town Hall meetings sponsored by the Commission. Commissioners Walter Rafolski (At Large #2) and Bill Brunson (Dist. 4) were also at the meeting. Islander Staff Photo - Permar

Torras toll on shaky ground with four commissioners at Town Hall

By Matthew J. Permar

Four Glynn County Commissioners expressed their opposition to the idea of reinstating a toll on the F.J. Torras Causeway last week (Thursday, Jan. 27) during the town hall meeting sponsored by District 3 Commissioner Wayne Neal.

The four commissioners included Neal, Bill Brunson (Dist. 4), Sammy Tostensen (Dist. 1) and Walter Rafolski (At Large #2).

Commission chairman David O'Quinn (At Large #1) was at the meeting but left about 6:30 for a prior family engagement.

The toll conversation came up late in the hour-long meeting as Neal was winding it down.

Neal had discussed various county revenue sources starting with the proposed Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) the Board of Commissioners (BOC) plans to have on the November general election ballot.

Neal asked the crowd of about 75 to 100 for suggestions for SPLOST projects. Only one person spoke up suggesting a District 3 community building where they could hold the town hall meetings.

Last week's meeting was held in a conference room at the Holiday Inn on SPUR 25.

Com. Rafolski said a community building wouldn't be likely because if they built one in District 3, they would have to build one in all the other

districts.

With no other SPLOST suggestions, Neal made some general comments about county revenue pointing out that Glynn has one of the lowest millage rates in the state.

He said the commission does not want to raise the millage and pointed out that last year it was lowered a little.

He added that Glynn is one of only five counties in the state that currently does not have a SPLOST, which could potentially bring in \$20 million to \$30 million a year into the county for special and capital projects.

Neal also said if the

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SPLOST is passed in November, under state law the county cannot start collecting it until April 1, 2023.

"At least half of the SPLOST," said Neal, "is paid by visitors to Glynn, who otherwise are not paying property taxes and other fees. This all helps keep property taxes lower."

Brunson commented that it is difficult these days to pay for these major high priced projects, like the proposed County Courthouse expansion and renovation, which is estimated at \$25 million, using only the general fund budget.

Neal talked about how bed tax revenues are increasing, in particular from the Short Term Rentals. Sales tax from internet retail sales is also increasing. Both these taxes are sent to the State Department of Revenue and then sent back to the county.

An audience member who works in the E-911 call center said they would like to see a fire station in the Hwy. 99 / Hwy. 32 area. They said at times trains cut that area off for long periods and fire trucks and ambulances have to come from Brantley.

Rafolski said the county had plans to replace the main fire station at Ballard and had considered two new smaller stations with one potentially in that area. They were included on the previous SPLOST, which did not pass. He also said there was federal funding available to help replace the fire station at the Brunswick Golden Isles Airport, but again the county's share was on last year's rejected SPLOST list.

At this point *The Islander* reporter asked a question about the toll on the Torras Causeway.

He pointed out that some people may think of the toll as a St. Simons Island issue, but considering there was likely a number of District 3 residents who either worked on the island or went to the beach or various restaurants, the toll was a county-wide issue.

He asked the commissioners what they thought about the toll.

Brunson said he was recently at a meeting that included the state Department of Transportation but had not spoken to them about the toll.

He added that the capital investment in the equipment could be as high as \$7 million and would be expensive to maintain, possibly as much as \$1 million a year.

Brunson said that Commissioner Cap Fendig, who proposed meeting with the State Road and Tollway Authority to get information about the toll, is concerned about the community.

"He (Fendig) just wants information from the state," said Brunson, "If he gets the information, we'll have something to talk about regarding the toll. Right now we're just guessing. There may be other ways to raise revenue, maybe a beach parking fee or parking meters."

Brunson said Fendig, who has taken criticism for the toll idea, was just looking for ways to deal with traffic and density issues on the island.

St. Simons resident Mike Haugen

spoke up saying asking for a toll was too much and island residents had fought years ago to get it removed.

Saying he wanted the commissioners to succeed, Haugen said there are other issues that need to be fixed. He said the county needs the SPLOST, but it needs to be managed better. He said asking the Public Works Director Dave Austin to manage all the SPLOST projects along with his regular job running Public Works was too much.

Brunson seemed to concur saying the county currently has about 80 projects underway, not just SPLOST projects. He said the residents pay property tax and it was fair to collect SPLOST from visitors as well as residents.

Rafolski said he does not support the toll and thinks the idea will be dropped.

Other issues discussed during the town hall meeting primarily centered around road projects drainage, sidewalks, and traffic control.

Concerns were expressed about the proposed roundabout at the Canal Rd. / Glynco Parkway intersection and its impact on access to the Nottinghill neighborhood. One of the Nottinghill access roads is close to the intersection.

A Nottinghill resident also commented about speeders in the neighborhood and asked about speed humps and an increased police presence.

Neal said there is a process to have speed humps put in neighborhoods that requires a certain number of residents to agree to have the devices installed. He also said there are currently 26 vacancies in the County Police Department, and as soon as they are filled the department will be able to get more officers on the streets.

A police department spokesperson who was at the meeting agreed saying the department currently has limited manpower and was being tested.

A woman asked about the Buc'ees travel center that has been proposed for Exit 42 on I-95, saying she was concerned about it's impact on nearby neighborhoods.

Neal said Exit 42 was a gateway into Glynn County, adding that the business would have to meet all state and local requirements and permits, including drainage.

Neal also addressed the \$1 million Capital Fund project allocation the commissioners had granted

themselves jokingly saying they were getting a lot of "positive" press on it.

He said, "We did not put the money in our pockets. It is being used for necessary projects that must be voted on and approved by the full commission.

Neal said he had considered spending part of his allocation on batting cages at the North Glynn recreation complex but the bid came in too high so it was rejected. As yet Neal has not spent any of his allocation.

He asked for suggestions on projects from the audience, but got no response.

An audience member asked about drainage in the Needwood area saying the roads flooded over Driggers Blvd. during the two hurricanes.

Public Works Director Dave Austin explained that drainage is designed to

handle rainfall from normal storms, not hurricanes.

Glynn Environmental Coalition representative Rachel Thompson said that her organization was not confident the proposed SPLOST would pass because of unfinished projects from the past SPLOST and due to the lack of a county manager. She said getting a county manager hired is "crucial" to the SPLOST.

She said there was a lot the commission could do to help with a SPLOST including passing the Development Impact Fee that the county studied several years ago, but was not initiated. She said there's a lot of development going on and the impact

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fee would be raising revenue.

Her advice on the SPLOST was to present a project list; the city needs to have town hall meetings; and they all need to work with the Jekyll Island Authority and the Joint Water and Sewer Commission.

Saying main issues included hurricane preparedness, air quality and drainage, she also recommended reinstating the SPLOST Citizens Oversight Committee.

Neal asked Thompson how many members did the Environmental Coalition have.

She said 120 dues paying members.

Neal said the SPLOST was a main topic of the Commission's current town hall meetings and there will be more meetings, along with surveys to find out what the public would like to see on the SPLOST list. "We plan to have the list together by July 1," said Neal.

Regarding the county manager, Neal said they are in the process of finding one. He said they are also looking at the personnel policy and pay scale now, so the new county manager won't have to deal with it as soon as he / she starts the job.

Town hall meetings are currently scheduled for District 5 at 6:00, Tuesday, February 1 in the Howard Coffin Park gymnasium and for District 2 at 6:45, Wednesday, February 9 in the Casino Theater on Beachview Dr. on St. Simons.